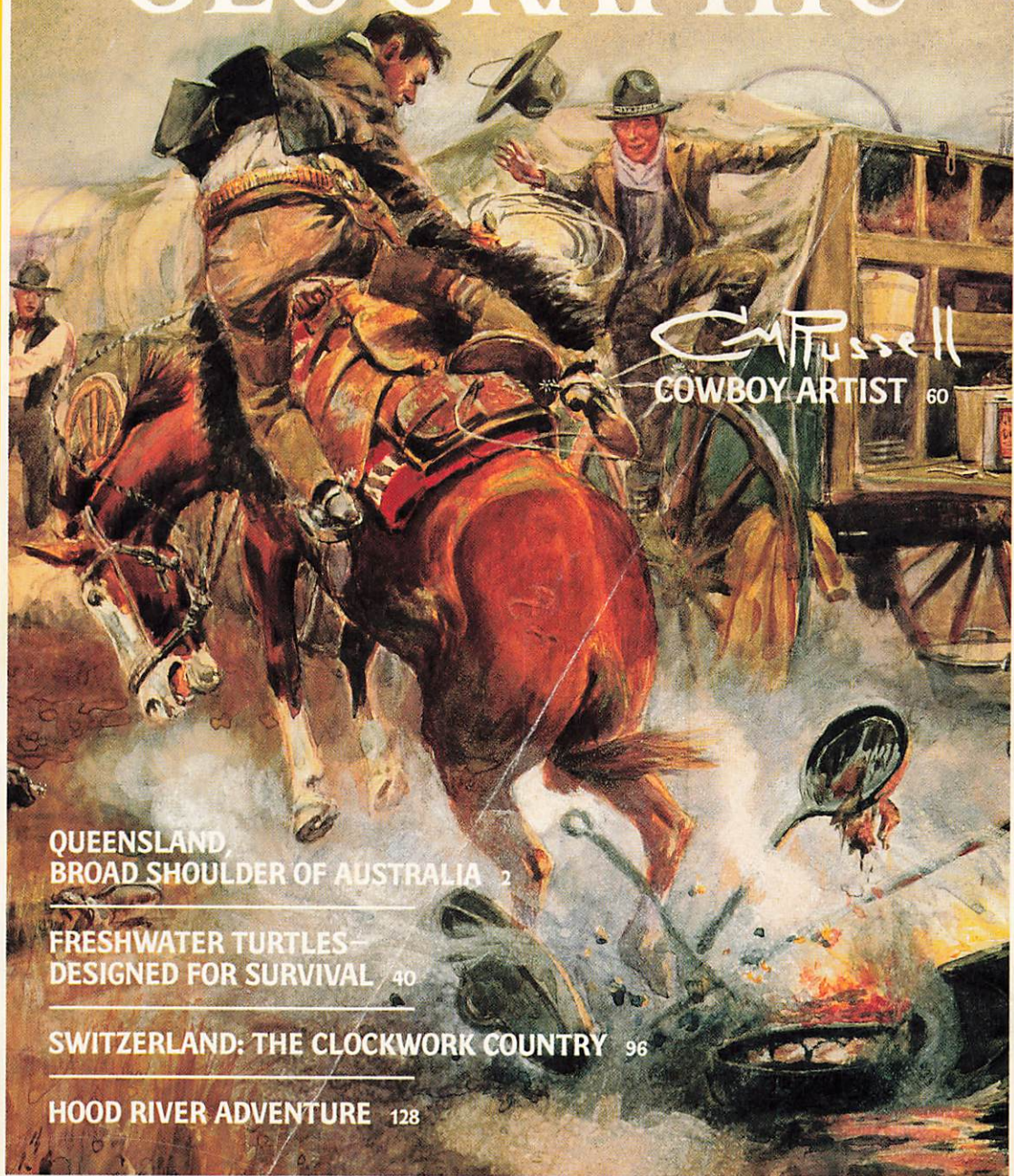


VOL. 169, NO. 1



JANUARY 1986

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



Charles Russell
COWBOY ARTIST 60

QUEENSLAND,
BROAD SHOULDER OF AUSTRALIA 2

FRESHWATER TURTLES—
DESIGNED FOR SURVIVAL 40

SWITZERLAND: THE CLOCKWORK COUNTRY 96

HOOD RIVER ADVENTURE 128

SEE "CHESAPEAKE BORNE" WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 15, ON PBS TV

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C.M. Russell

COWBOY ARTIST

By BART McDOWELL ASSISTANT EDITOR

Photographs by SAM ABELL



C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM, GREAT FALLS, MONTANA

Two loves—drawing and cowboying—vied for the soul of Charles Marion Russell, much to the benefit of American art and history. Today just one of his paintings might be worth a ranch in Montana's Judith Basin, where in 1882 he started wrangling horses, as Gerald Mack does today (opposite).



IT STARTED ONE SNOW-SWEPT DAY a century ago, during Montana's catastrophic winter of 1886-87. In the bunkhouse of the OH Ranch a 22-year-old cowboy detached a scrap of cardboard from a collar box and fashioned a watercolor the size of a postcard.

That picture today is almost as famous as the name of the young wrangler whose artistic career it launched, Charles Marion Russell.

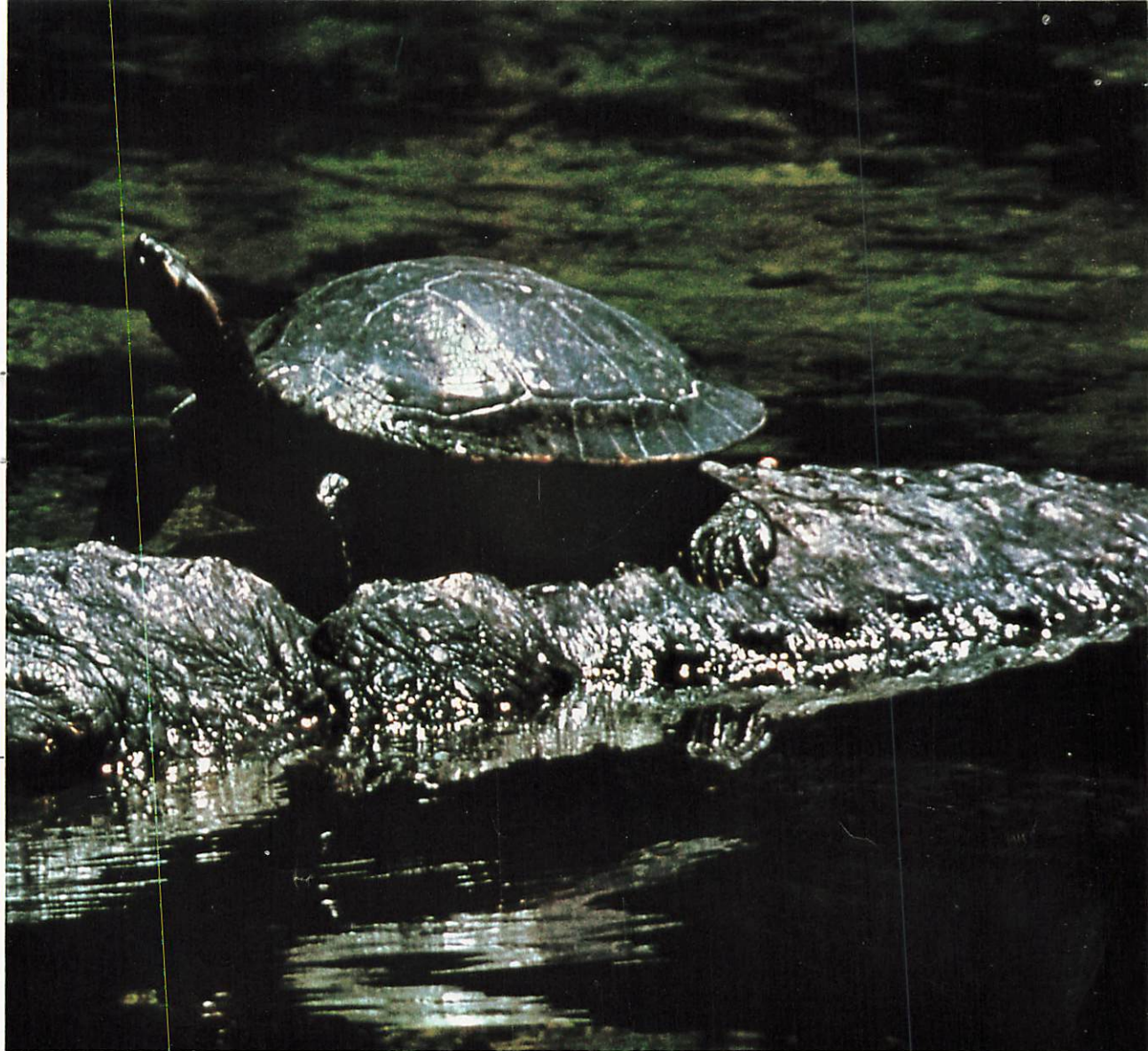
I first saw Charley Russell's pictures in my grandfather's den. I was a small boy in Texas, and my grandfather had framed some Russell prints—cowboys and animals in sweaty action—and hung them on a wall beside some deer antlers.

Since my grandfather had once been a wrangler himself and scorned all drugstore cowboys, I knew from the first that Russell pictured life as it was, rough and real, "with the bark on," as Texans say. I've been on Russell's trail off and on ever since, from Montana's Judith Basin to the California beaches he lampooned and so enjoyed.

But please: I'm not an art expert, historian, anthropologist, or bronc rider. They're all equipped to praise the uncanny honesty of Charley Russell. It's his canny *dishonesty* that I especially like: the touch of caricature, the pin he jabs at pompous balloons, the droll hyperbole of his stories, the schoolboy snicker of his deliberately misspelled letters. His humor reminds me of my own Uncle Bert—and perhaps that's the secret of the Russell mystique: Throughout the American West, he's a friend of the family. He turns the pages of our own family album.

I've lately been talking to cowboys and Indians about Russell. And to some other unlikely critics—trappers, loggers, junk dealers—as well as other artists, collectors, and gallery directors. Charley Russell holds his own and then some. Russell scholarship is flowering in books.

Charley Russell's is the only statue (Continued on page 67)



WENDELL METZEN

Basking steps up the metabolism of the cold-blooded turtle.

As winter settled over the New England landscape, Bill and I returned to Rainbow Run in Florida for a final dive. On the day we arrived, the weather was overcast. No turtles basked on their accustomed logs, so Bill and I dived to the bottom of the crystal-line stream. There we happened on a female Florida snapping turtle we had seen nearly a year before. She was recognizable by a long notch in her shell, probably the result of an encounter with a disappointed alligator or the propeller of a trapper's boat.

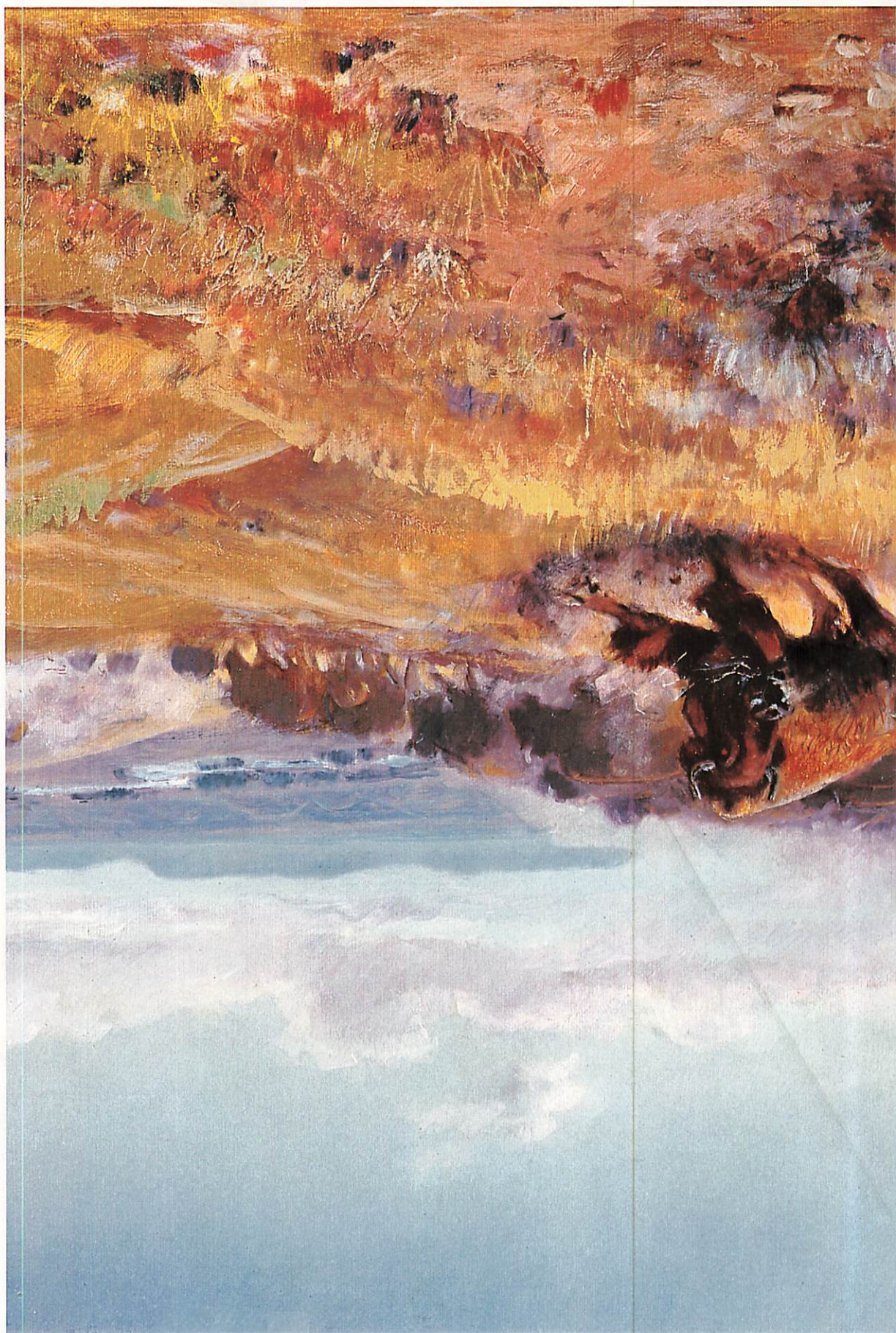
We watched as she stalked the stream bottom, moving weightlessly over the sand like an astronaut on the moon. One hundred and eighty-five million years ago her ancestors

had roamed the forests and waters of the earth. They had survived the dinosaurs, and they were here when the newcomer, man, emerged on the planet a mere four or five million years ago.

The snapper turned from us at last—huge, armored, stately in her movements. I watched her swim away into a jungle of wild celery that waved like pennants in her wake. The last I saw of her was the keel of her beveled shell, disappearing among the underwater shadows.

To me that shell, that coat of arms, had become a symbol of survival. God and man willing, I thought, its owner and her kind will endure for eons to come. □



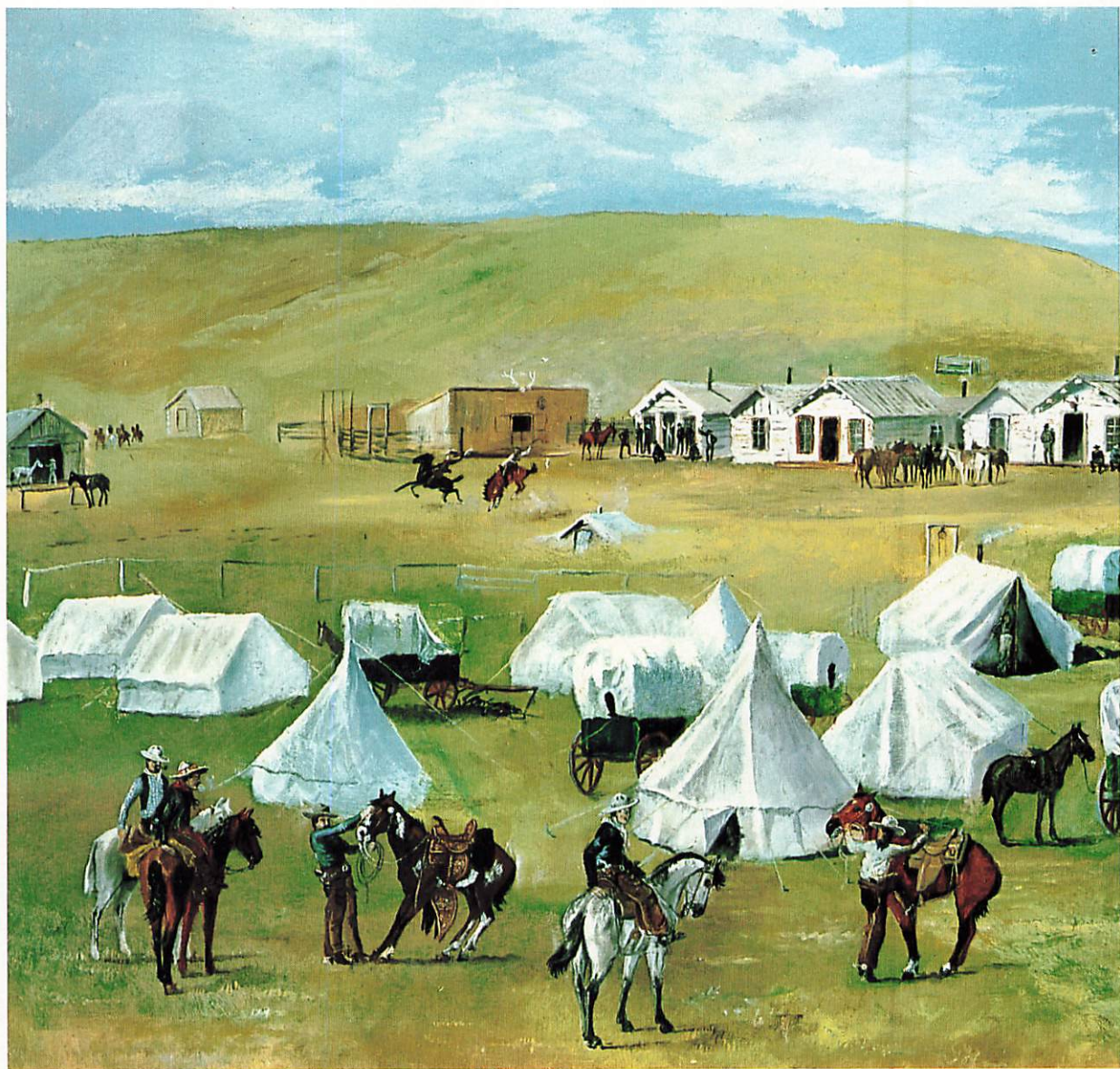




Homage to the red man and his vanishing era was celebrated in hundreds of Russell's works, especially those depicting the last gasp of a heroic tradition of native America—the Indian buffalo hunt. By 1900 he was unrivaled in his ability to depict the animal whose skull he chose as his emblem. He captured the hunt's drama in a 1919 painting called "Fighting Meat" (left). The 1914 drawing (below) reflects the features of Young Boy (above), a lifetime friend and subject of many works. The appended note—sent to a judge—expresses Russell's feelings for America's Indians.



*This is the only real
American
he fought and died for his
country
to day he has no vote
no country and is not a
citizen
but history will not forget him*



A primitive exuberance marks Russell's early works, the most famous of which, "Cowboy Camp during the Roundup" (above), depicts the spring cattle roundup at Utica, Montana, in 1887. Commissioned by Utica saloonkeeper James R. Shelton, the painting is packed with Russell's cowboy friends from the Judith Basin, many of whom appear in an 1884 photograph that shows Russell seated in the front row, third from left (right).





AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH (ABOVE); C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

(Continued from page 60) of a full-time artist in the U. S. Capitol Rotunda. A wildlife refuge bears his name; so does a mountain of stone. The C. M. Russell Auction of Original Western Art in Great Falls, Montana, once a year and for one brief weekend turns Charley's hometown into one of the world's most lucrative art markets. Thousands attend and spend more than half a million dollars in three days.

Forgers pay the highest compliment to him with a cottage industry of Russell fake making. Last year the dean of Russell scholarship, Fred Renner, alone found 39 forgeries. No wonder. Sixty years after the artist's death a good Russell canvas is worth the price of a cattle ranch. Not bad for a cowboy

who once rode night herd for \$40 a month.

BUT FOR ALL the success of his 4,500 pieces of art, Russell the man is almost as celebrated as his works.

"I like Charley Russell because he's taken me back in time," wrote Joey Nardinger, age 11, a schoolboy in Great Falls last year. "Charley and I have walked across Montana together. We have laughed with our friends, lived in Indian camps, and herded cattle on stormy nights. . . . Charley touched us." Joey won an essay contest for the best of reasons: simple honesty.

Russell even keeps scholars honest. Again, Fred Renner, age 88. A Montanan by birth, he knew Charley personally from

boyhood on. Fred and wife Ginger own one of the great private collections of Russell paintings and sculpture and tend the single greatest archive of Russell facts.

When Dale and Joan Stauffer come visiting the Renners, it's like a class reunion. The Stauffers are doing research on Charley's wife, Nancy, for a biography Joan is writing. "We stay up till 3 a.m. gossiping about Charley and Nancy," says Joan. Remarkably, Russell scholars share sources and facts like a neighborly cup of sugar.

If his neighbors still feel nostalgic about him, that's only natural. Charley Russell himself had a sentimental attachment to lost causes and times gone by, to virgin forests, unplowed plains, and roaming buffalo herds. He preferred cowboys and ranchers to the nesters who turned sod "grass side down." While Sitting Bull was still alive and George Custer not long dead, Charley

"Waiting for a Chinook," Russell called this small watercolor, painted in the winter of 1886-87 to describe the effects of a brutal winter on cattle in the Judith Basin—and the longing for a chinook, a warm wind from the southwest. A wordless message to a cattle owner, it earned Russell immediate local fame.



*This is the real thing
painted the winter of 1886
at the OH ranch
L M Russell*

MONTANA STOCKGROWERS ASSOCIATION, HELENA

heatedly defended the red man as the "real American." He lived with Indians and learned their sign language. He always wore the bright-colored sash of a half-breed—"peculiar in my dress," he admitted. "I am eccentric (that is a polite way of saying you're crazy)."

He was an outspoken conservationist ("man cant win much fighting nature"), an environmentalist before the word was in fashion; he called cars "skunk-wagons," and as a reluctant passenger he swore mightily whenever the speed exceeded 30 miles an hour. "In tame countrys on a good road an autos all right," he wrote, "but if your hunting for aney thing wilder than a Doctor take a horse."

Charley protested the extermination of wild horses, writing, "If they killed men off as soon as they were useless Montana woudent be so crowded." That was Charley: spelling rebelliously and thinking Montana crowded.

He was a man's man who loved the outdoors and hunting trips, but he would not himself kill an animal for sport.

"If a fellow got throwed off a bucking horse," one cowboy neighbor recalled, "Charley would actually turn white until the rider got on his feet again, and then he would hightail it to get pencil and paper to draw a comic picture of the happening." Or maybe he'd make a phrase ("he's sittin on the ground with two hands full of corral dust").

Women's fashions sometimes shocked him ("every rag she's wearing wouldn't pad a crutch"). But he also expressed a chauvinist's admiration: "I used to think that men could stand more punishment than women, but I was wrong. In winter a girl wears a fox skin, but her brisket is bared to the weather, and there ain't nothing on her warmer than a straw hat. . . . No sir, a woman can go farther with a lipstick than a man with a Winchester and a side of bacon."

When young artists or storytellers sought his advice, he insisted "sinch your saddle on romance." Certainly Russell did. And yet, when squeamish Easterners objected to one

of his Indian paintings—the tribe's dogs were lapping at the blood of fresh-killed game—Russell refused to change his painting: "Tell 'em that's the way it was." Romantic, yes, but he was a very real realist.

CHARLEY WAS BORN during the Civil War, on March 19, 1864, near that crossroads city St. Louis, Missouri. From the early 19th century his family had looked West and prospered in coal mining and brickmaking. And around the dining table in their sumptuous house, relatives talked about the fur trade, scouts, trappers, and Indian skirmishes. Nephew Austin Russell admitted that Charley "did have half-breed cousins . . . a great-uncle who was a squaw man, and two other uncles who got scalped."

From his earliest days young Charley insisted he was going out West. By age ten he could ride his pony, Gyp—and also model figures in mud. Soon he was drawing crude pictures of Indians and playing hooky from school. When a military academy failed to straighten him out, his parents arranged for 15-year-old Charley to go West and work on a sheep ranch. Surely, gritty reality would bring the boy to his senses.

From a train window the youngster first saw the Great Plains; then, switching to a stagecoach, he got a closer, wider look. The prairie stretched forever, as gold as all Castile, until distance turned the mountains blue. When the stage stopped to rest the horses, Charley found his first buffalo skull, the horned head of a bull bleaching in the sun. (The buffalo skull meant something special to Charley. In his early pictures he would paint a buffalo skull somewhere in the foreground; later, he joined a stylized skull with his own signature; and still later he would copyright that logo. He would even one day call his summer lodge Bull Head. That skull was his *memento mori*.)

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, Charley quickly learned to despise sheep. "I'd lose the damn things as fast as they'd put 'em on the ranch," he later recalled. And in all his life he did only one picture of sheep.

His carelessness cost him his job and gave him a bad name. He was broke and hungry when a tough fellow with a scraggly beard

came along and offered him a meal of elk meat, beans, and coffee. This was Jake Hoover, a trapper, hunter, and prospector, who sold meat and skins.

Charley threw in with Jake, as folks there phrased it, helping out with chores in exchange for food and lodging. This limited partnership lasted two years.

"His cabin was in Pig-Eye Basin over in Judith country," Charley recalled. "You could see deer from the door of his shack 'most any day . . . he'd as soon take a shot at men as kill one of them deer. . . . Every livin' thing around there liked old Jake. Pine squirrels would climb into his lap an' sit on his shoulder."

Today deer in the Pig-Eye Basin graze, alert but fearless, in much the same way. And game is still plentiful in these parts.

ONE WINTER DAY photographer Sam Abell and I rode a snowmobile in a dazzle of snow spray up the Judith River's South Fork. A blanket of white hid the works of man—roads, fences—and preserved the tracks of elk and coyotes. This was mountain country turned neo-virginal, given back to nature, the very Montana that Jake Hoover and Kid Russell knew.

"I remember Jake's old log cabin," notes Mrs. Ken Perry. "My father used it for an ice shed."

Time and snowfalls brought down the roof and rotted logs. And Picky Perry's father, William Trask, finally rebuilt the cabin, faithfully using hand-hewn logs conforming to Charley Russell's paintings of the place.

When we arrived, the cabin stood solid and tight, a fortress against the winter. On Jake's own stone hearth we built a fire to thaw our fingers and dry soggy gloves. Claustrophobic quarters. No wonder Charley and Jake were outdoorsmen.

"It must have been a hard life sometimes," thinks Picky's son Lanny, himself a professional trapper from time to time. "Great-granddad Trask said he once found a dead man with his hand caught in a bear trap. It could have happened to any trapper working alone. He buried the man and kept the trap."

Lanny's Uncle Bill Perry, who made his living as a trapper, remarks that "beavers

brought trappers to Montana, and we still have them. A skin brings \$20 on average. I catch some and leave the rest for seed. . . . Hoover might've also hunted wolves and lions. Bobcats, too."

We speculate a bit—the influence that skinning and butchering would have had on a potential artist who had never formally studied anatomy.

And what does Bill think of Russell's work? "Greatest painter that ever lived!" Ever catch Russell in a mistake? "Well . . . several of us trappers were talking about Russell's pictures, and we decided—*maybe*—he'd put a bear's back paw on the front in one picture." An anatomical lapse, though, seems no stranger than trappers discussing an artist's work.

LONG BEFORE KID RUSSELL turned professional painter, Montana people talked about and saved his sketches. For that reason museum visitors today can watch a primitive Kid Russell as he grew up, learned his craft, and became an astonishingly sophisticated artist. Like seeing Grandma Moses evolve into Georgia O'Keeffe.

First, of course, came the living experience, material he would paint all his life. Cowboying began for Charley in the raw spring of 1882, when he started as night wrangler for about 400 horses. Soon he was night-herding cattle. It was the loneliest work a cowboy could do: He was a human substitute for a fence. A night herder kept cows from straying off or stampeding in the





THOMAS GILCREASE INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART, TULSA (BELOW LEFT); DAVID L. ARNOLD, NGS STAFF (ABOVE)



"I was a wild young man," Kid Russell admitted. He loved to paint cowboys on the loose, as in "A Quiet Day in Utica," held by Janis Rosman. A later painting, "The Camp Cook's Trouble," shows a horse running amok. "Smoking Up," an early example of Russell's sculpture, once owned by Theodore Roosevelt, captures the same unbridled spirit.



SIEGEL STUDIO, PHOENIX,
FROM THE FREDERIC G. RENNER COLLECTION



night, calming them down with the reassuring sound of a human voice. Charley sang to the cows for the next 11 years.

Lonely as the night job was, it gave the Kid time by day to watch other cowboys in action. And time to draw pictures. He drew everything—and *on* everything: tobacco kegs, shoe boxes, cracker boxes, mirrors, the lining of a Stetson hat, birchbark and buckskin, a bank vault door, even a green silk petticoat.

THERE CAME the searingly hot, dry summer of 1886, and people noted some strange natural omens: Beavers stored twice their usual winter supply of willow limbs; muskrats grew fur curiously thick; ducks and geese flew south weeks early.

During the October roundup in the Judith

Basin, temperatures plunged. One lightly clad young cowboy—not Charley—came indoors after night herding and observed that “fools go way up into the Arctic Ocean hunting for the North Pole, and it ain’t over half a mile from right here.”

Heavy November snows continued into December, and then in January came a chinook, a thawing wind from the southwest. Late in January a killer storm blew in with 60-mile-an-hour winds. Slush hardened into an icy shield, and livestock could not reach the grass beneath that crust. Starving cattle ate the wool off dead sheep, then fell dead themselves. Before a chinook blew in on February 27, some ranchers lost 90 percent of their cattle.

Jesse Phelps was not much luckier. In the bunkhouse of his OH outfit near Utica, he struggled with a letter to his friend Louie

A wilderness finishing school for the greenhorn artist, Jake Hoover's cabin on the South Fork of the Judith River (below, during a visit by Russell) was Charley's home for two years, shortly after his arrival in Montana. Working with Hoover, a professional trapper and hunter, he would learn most of what he knew about animal behavior and anatomy, vital to his future work. An on-site reconstruction (left) mirrors the cabin in his drawing (bottom).



C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM (ABOVE); BUFFALO BILL HISTORICAL CENTER, CODY, WYOMING





Groomed for success by wife Nancy, seen here in their 1896 wedding picture (above), Russell grew from a raw talent into a prolific artist of international renown. An inspiration to humorist Will Rogers, he was a storyteller without peer, who loved to fashion miniature figures from beeswax while he talked. In a 1916 photo, cowboys admire a Russell tale thus embellished (below).

C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM (ABOVE); MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

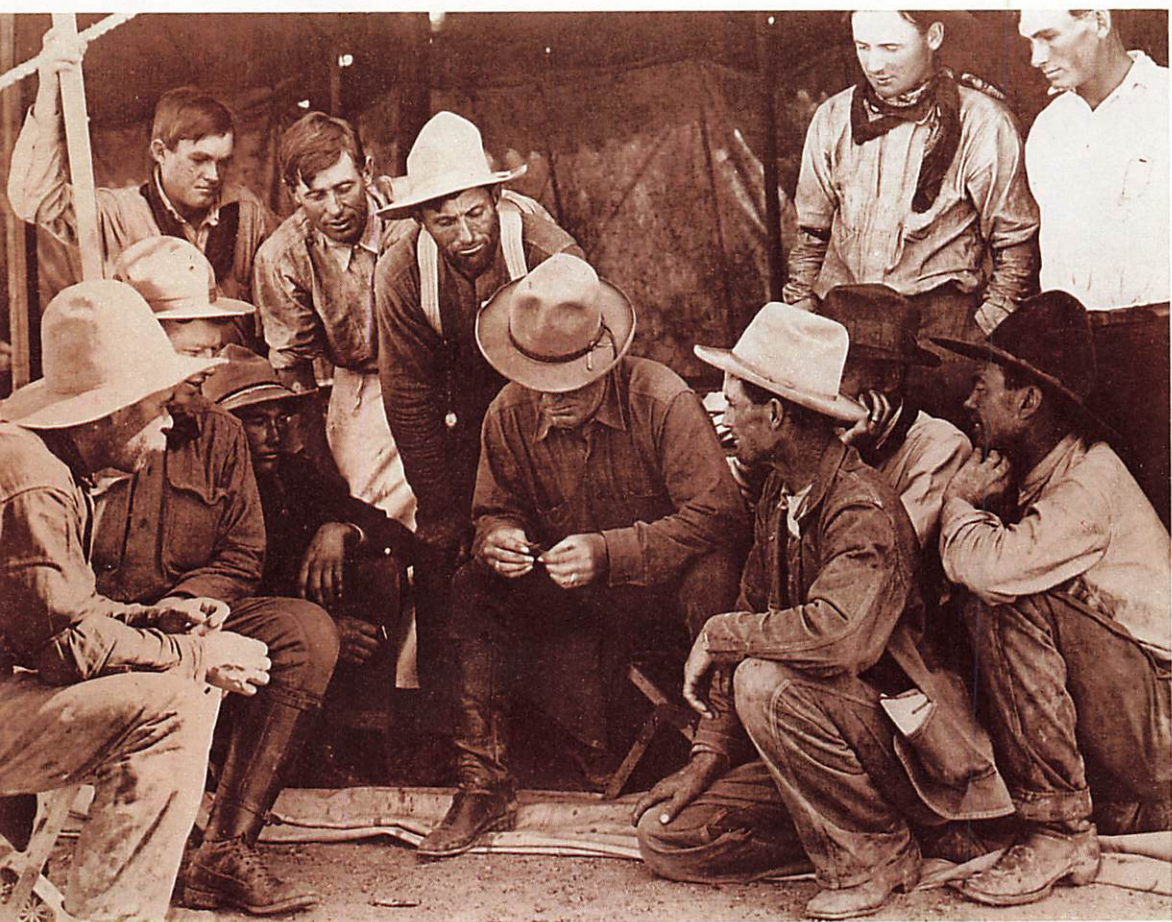
Kaufman in Helena “to tell him how tough it is.” Phelps got some help from Kid Russell, who roughed out a picture of a skeletal cow circled in the snow by wolves. Under it he lettered a title: “Waiting for a Chinook.”

“Put that in your letter,” said the Kid. The picture told it all.

“Louie don’t need a letter,” said Phelps, and sent only the watercolor to Helena.

When Kaufman got that picture of a dying cow wearing his own Bar-R brand, he got drunk—and then showed his fellow ranchers what the winter looked like. “Waiting for a Chinook” won instant, lasting fame (page 68). Visitors still buy copies of it as a postcard all over Montana.

YEARS AGO I talked to some old-timers whose families had weathered that terrible winter. Old Lear Flannigan recalled the tales about the ranches when the chinook finally thawed the snow: “You could step from one carcass to the next





one all along the Judith." Bill McGregor could himself recall other bad winters there: "I seen it 51° below one day."

Lear Flannigan remembered that in '87 his family "went seriously broke," as he told me. They started again, milking cows and selling butter—"once sold a wagon load of butter to the gold miners at Giltedge."

Gradually Montana came back. As early as the spring roundup, a saloonkeeper in Utica named James Shelton asked Charley to paint a picture to hang on the wall behind his bar.

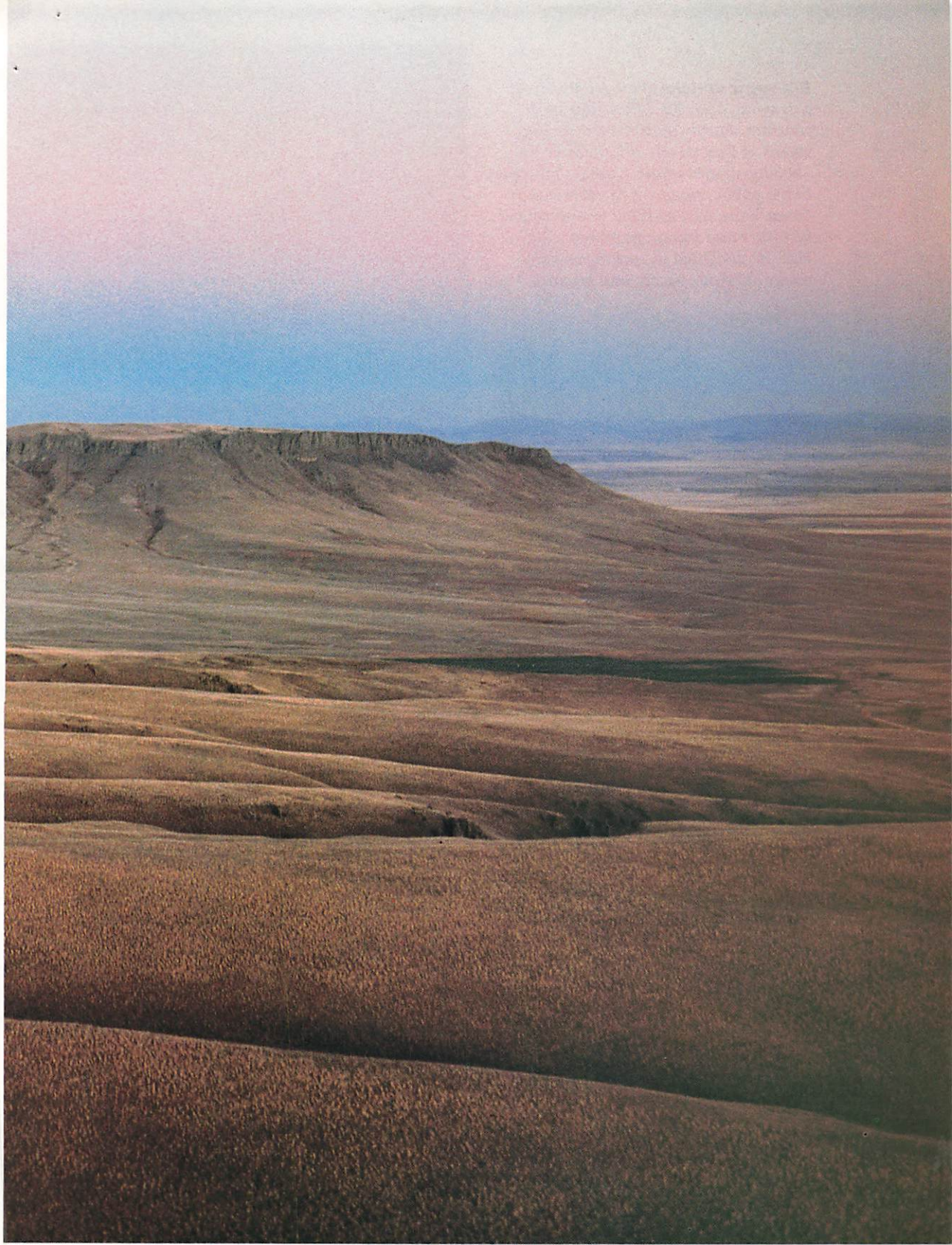
The young cowboy took a piece of canvas

about two feet wide by four feet long and painted the entire town of Utica with the roundup in the foreground. People could identify every cowboy by name. "And their horses. And their saddlemakers," said one old-timer. Jim Shelton was sitting outside his saloon. Horses were bucking, cowboys waving their hats, and the stagecoach was racing dustily into town (pages 66-7).

"I used to meet that stagecoach pretty near every day," recalled old Bill McGregor. "Stage changed horses in Utica. It had four horses, mostly old spoiled saddle horses, too tough to be rode much but tougher



Courted by an early moon, Square Butte unfolds in spacious grandeur 20 miles west of Great Falls. A backdrop in numerous Russell paintings, this mile-



wide tableland of rock can be seen from the town's outskirts, and Charley sometimes rode out to view it for inspiration when he was "fighting a painting."

Romantic notions of an artist's life in a drawing from the 1890s (**bottom**) contrast sharply with the reality of a sketch of Russell at work (**below**). In 1903 his dream studio (**right**), now open to the public, rose next to his house in Great Falls, and he filled it with rough furniture and Indian paraphernalia. Here he delighted in cooking cowboy meals of beans, bacon, and biscuits.



"CHARLIE PAINTING IN HIS CABIN" FROM THE AMON CARTER MUSEUM

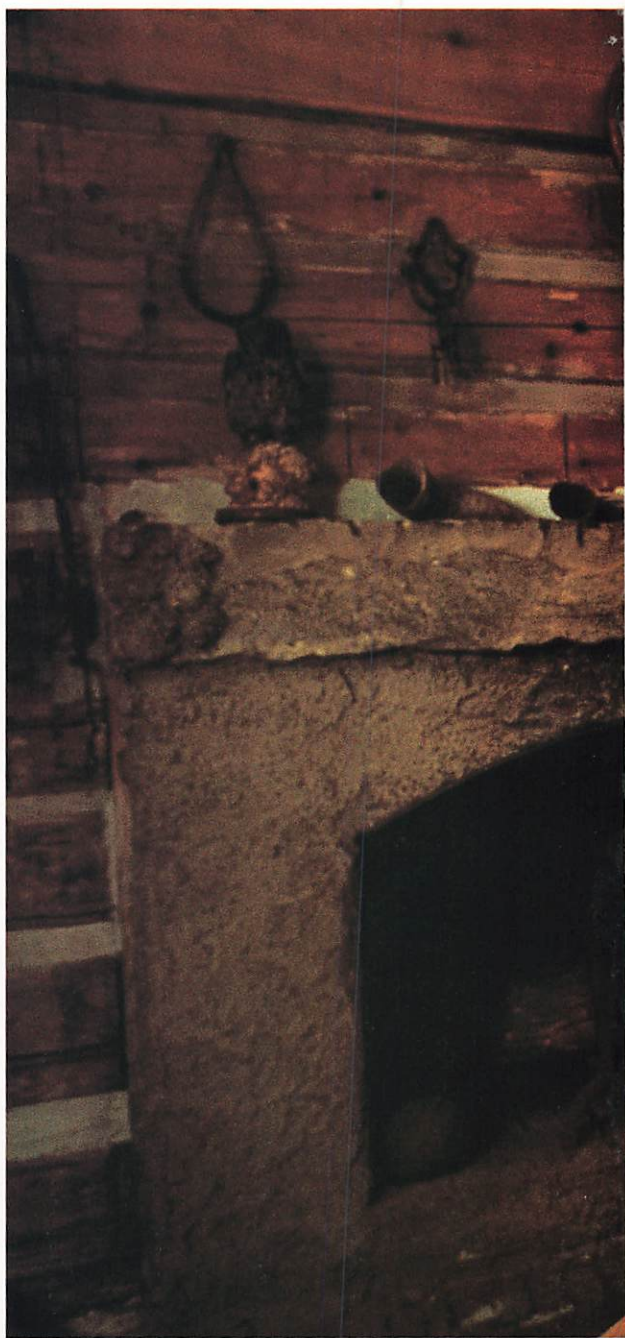


"MY STUDIO AS MOTHER THOUGHT" FROM THE AMON CARTER MUSEUM

than hell. Stage made ten miles an hour—average.

"Yes, Utica was quite a little town. Four bars, two hotels, two big livery barns." It had about 100 residents in the 1880s—and about a fifth of that today. Instead of a stage-coach, Utica now has a museum and historical society, locally maintained.

Ken and Picky Perry are among local history buffs. Their living room sports some reproductions of Russell's paintings (one titled



"A Quiet Day in Utica"), and they collect oral history from old-timers on tape. We listen to Lear Flannigan's sister Lilly, at age 92, talk about Charley Russell: "He was *all right*. He used to come by my Granddad Reilley's place every week for buttermilk." Meantime, we sample Picky's apple pie and gourmet milk from the Perrys' Holstein, Dolly Parton.

Utica has always served more than milk. On a Saturday night at the Oxen Yoke Inn



"SMOKE SIGNAL" FROM THE C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

cowboys come to drink a local favorite called alternately a slammer or a snakebite ("It needs two names—double-strong"), a sweet drink, gaseous and ghastly. Times change. Baseball caps may outnumber wide-brimmed hats (caps fit better inside a pickup truck), but Russell pictures still liven conversation. Prints of some funny ones hang in the saloon men's room.

Charley would have liked that. "I have always been what is called a good mixer,"

he once remarked. "I had friends when I had nothing else. . . . I was a wild young man. . . . I drank, but never alone, and when I drank it was no secret."

FRED RENNER says Charley's whiskey consumption has been exaggerated. "No cowman would permit drinking on the job," says Fred. "And he really didn't trade paintings for drinks. Saloonkeepers commissioned his paintings,

and people assumed Charley had traded for a drink. He quit drinking entirely in 1908."

Fred documents only one specific incident when Charley Russell was really drunk. "It was about 1893. He and a friend, Finch David, were staying in different hotels, and a saloon was in between them. Each one insisted on walking the other home—and each time they'd pass that saloon, they'd have another drink. Back and forth. They were staggering when a policeman picked them up. He put Charley to bed and told Finch, 'You go to your own hotel—if you weren't a friend of Russell's, I'd put you in jail.'"

Just once—documented. "There's a difference in whiskey—some's worse than others," Charley observed. He knew his

Blood Indians of Alberta, kin of the Black-foot confederacy. Some say he considered taking a squaw as wife. At least he used many as subjects for some of his most valuable paintings.

Sam and I followed Charley to the Canadian Blood Indian Reserve at Stand Off, Alberta, to see it—as Charley described it—in winter. Stand Off sits on a wide stretch of undulating prairie; the southern horizon is serrated with the splendid mountains of Glacier National Park, chief among them Chief Mountain, abrupt, steep, set apart.

"Here they have fresh air to a fault," Sam observed, when a cold, surgical wind lopped off his cap. The sun was shining, but gusts stirred dramatic ground blizzards, blurring peaks with sunlit snow falling upward from the earth.

"This is the time in winter when we could always tell which families were lazy," said big Rufus Goodstriker, our impressive Blood guide. "Lazy people didn't put up enough wood or food for the whole winter. They had to go to other tepees and ask for handouts of berries, meat, and wood."

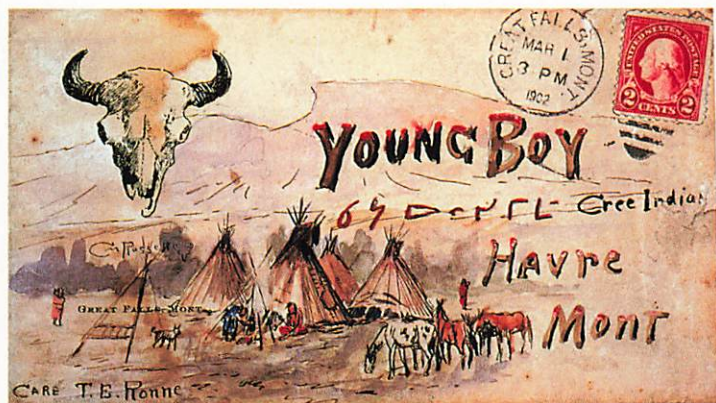
At age 61 Rufus looks like the tribal personage he is:

gray braids and strong Indian features, a rock talisman and grizzly-bear teeth hanging from a thong on his chest. He moves quickly—he was once a marathon runner and boxer. He is now an herbalist and patriarch—10 children, 14 grandchildren—the owner of three school buses and a large log house.

"Goodstriker is a bad translation of my name," he explains. "It should be more like Lucky Man—and I *am* lucky." The Bloods have surnames both epic and earthy: Iron Horn, Takes the Gun Strong, Melting Tallow, Getting Good Things, Tailfeathers, Weaselfat.

Rufus shows us around the 550-square-mile reserve. The buffalo-skin tepee vanished with the wild buffalo; Bloods now live in bleak, boxlike houses with vacant yards of snow or mud.

But in the reserve headquarters we sit down together to thumb through some



"brave maker" or "trade whiskey," as they called the terrible stuff. "If a man had enough of this booze, you couldn't drown him. You could even shoot a man through the brain or heart, and he wouldn't die till he sobered up."

When Kid Russell got paid, according to one friend, he split his money "two ways—wine and women." But, always the romantic, Kid Russell was respectful of the hardest tarts, girls now remembered only as Dutch Lena, Lil, and Lou. He gave them sketches and watercolors and bright posies painted on platters. Years later, Charley's nephew reported, the middle-aged owners of these trinkets would ask Charley to touch up the faded colors a bit.

DURING THE LATE MONTHS of 1888 Charley got to study the ways of Indian maidens. On an extended visit to Canada he lived for a time with the



THOMAS GILCREASE INSTITUTE OF AMERICAN HISTORY AND ART (FACING PAGE); C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

Labors of love, as thoughtfully executed as his commercial works, hundreds of Russell's illustrated letters and envelopes (facing page) are today highly valued collectibles. Earthy and humorous, Russell's "Paper Talk" was spiced with creative spellings and grammar. Scholars agree that they were not a sign of illiteracy but an extension of Russell's art. Written to his neighbor Albert Trigg, the above letter describes Russell's boyhood initiation into gun handling with an overloaded gun.



Cinematic tension pervades "When Shadows Hint Death," an oil from 1915 that depicts the dread of an encounter with Indians, here seen only as shadows. Though famous for action scenes, Russell in many of his works was also able to focus the viewer's imagination on action to come.

prints of Russell Indian paintings, and the old days revive. We contemplate paintings of buffalo hunts, where tides of animals move like William Turner's oceans. We note the Russell signature.

"I belong to the Buffalo Society," Rufus remarks. "Members are not supposed to break skulls—any skulls—for they are very sacred. The spirit of the buffalo is known in our prayers as leader of all four-legged



DUQUESNE CLUB, PITTSBURGH

animals. The domesticated buffalo is different. He has no spirit, no freedom, no soul. When I see a buffalo in the zoo, I cry sometimes."

We turn to pictures of daily living. "You see, this woman's face is painted up—an elder has painted her. They don't paint their faces themselves. . . . Here women are bringing home meat from a hunt. Our women are spoiled today. . . . Look at that

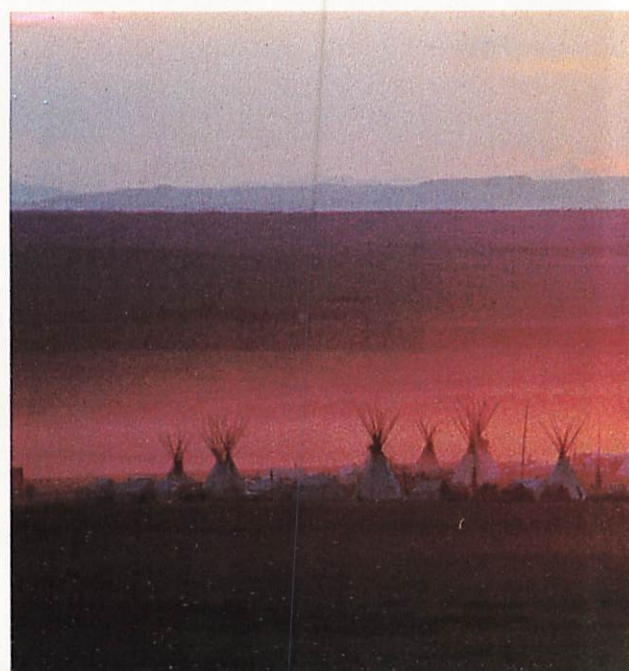
buffalo skeleton: It was killed by a white man, because Indians always used everything—the tongue and blood for ceremonies, the rib bones to make little sleds for children, the sinews for sewing. . . .

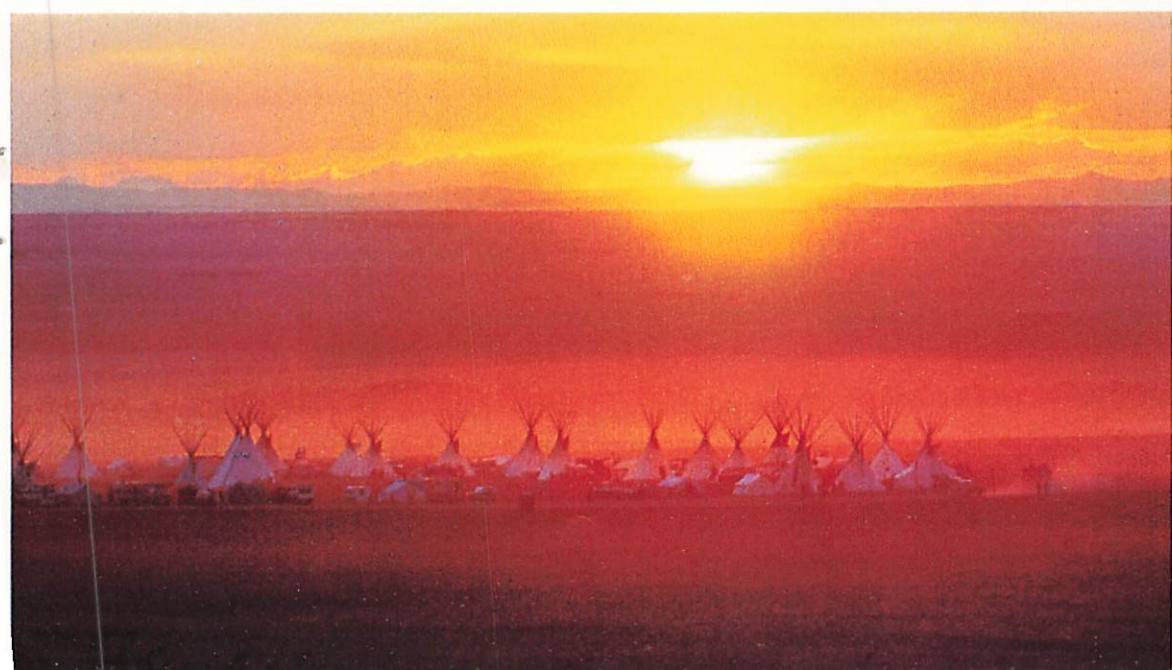
"That red hand mark on the horse—it was made by an elder, a blessing for the horse for war or a hunt. Everything is spiritual.

"When a mare had been bred to a good buffalo-chasing horse, that mare was tied

"I'm all Injun but my hide," wrote the artist in a story—and to underscore his affinity sometimes dressed the part, as in this photo from a family collection (below). During a trip to Canada in 1888, Russell stayed with the Blood Indians, kin of the Blackfoot confederacy, a visit that inspired "Indian Hunters' Return" (right). They gave him the name Ah-wah-cous, or antelope, which he used on occasion to sign letters. Today on Alberta's Blood Indian Reserve, tepees rise again each summer for their Sun Dance (right, bottom).

MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, MACKAY COLLECTION (RIGHT);
C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM (BELOW)







Talking sign, Indians assure two cowboys that their lost friends are nearby in "Lost in a Snowstorm—We Are Friends," one of Russell's earliest oil paintings, done when he was 24. Russell himself became adept at Indian sign language—universal to the Plains tribes—during his sojourn with the Bloods, who called him the "picture writer."

every morning with her baby colt in the middle of gopher holes. The colt learned from the first to dodge gopher holes. . . . And to break a young horse, they would touch the colt all over his body and take him into a river shoulder deep. He couldn't buck because he would have to put his head under water. . . ."

Katie Wells, age 72, concurred: "Most of us have pinto horses—the best horse for the Bloods." Katie noticed the beadwork and



AMON CARTER MUSEUM

designs in Russell's paintings. "Our designs are angles. Other tribes had flower designs. It's so *real*, what Russell does. His paintings show what our life was like."

THE BLOODS GAVE CHARLEY an Indian name: Ah-wah-cous, or antelope. (On at least one letter Charley used this name—with the head of an antelope instead of his usual buffalo skull.) But they also gave him indelible

memories. He learned to live without sugar or salt: "I missed the sugar only a few days . . . But I never got used to doing without salt. . . . I dreamed about it."

And friendships. His most consistent subject was Young Boy, a dignified Cree who brought Charley handcrafts, shields, designs, which later appeared in a host of Russell oils, watercolors, and other works—every detail anthropologically accurate. In fact Fred Renner estimates that only

George Catlin painted more tribes of North American Indians than did Charley Russell.

IN THE SPRING of 1889 Charley—wearing moccasins and rags—had returned to Montana Territory, cowboy-ing for his grub, painting for fun.

And not just painting. He carried a discolored lump of beeswax in his saddlebag or pocket and played with it from time to time, modeling figures of animals or caricatures of people. Sometimes he would talk to someone with his hands hidden and busy. In a few minutes he would present a freshly modeled figure to the person he was talking with—a pig, a bear, or something fanciful, unseen by them or even by his own eyes until the

presentation. Once in a while, if he had trouble drawing something, he would model a figure in beeswax and copy the model on paper or canvas.

He had trouble with composition sometimes. To fill out a canvas he might arrange a fallen tree or a boulder to pull the picture together. He learned more about colors.

But as his paintings changed, so did the Judith Basin. Fences had arrived. And sheep. Charley trailed cattle north to the Milk River for free grass.

Lonesome. It was a word Charley Russell spelled variously but used a lot. It caught the spirit of night-wrangling horses in the rain and hot days trailing cattle alone under the Big Sky. It explained the sadness of cowboy



songs, the homelessness, the rip and roar on rare trips to town.

We sense that life even today, riding a helicopter over Charley Russell country in late winter. Beyond some cursive drifts, perpetual wind has worn down one snowfield so a yellow, last-year stubble bristles through the white. Ice clogs the serpentine of streams just starting to thaw.

Near a snug ranch house the haystack has dwindled. The chopper's noise quiets the world so a silent dog barks steam. Cows plod single file in their leader's tracks, and a straggling calf is running, tail outstretched, to find its mother. Toward the horizon dark roads lead T-square straight; fenced indentations show us Air Force "rocket ranches,"

as local folks call them. ("Not near dangerous as gopher holes," one cowboy said.)

Our engine changes pitch. We climb, and the pilot points. Geese are flying north on their promissory course. We surprise two deer who leap in unison as on pogo sticks.

At eye level we approach Russell Point, formidable stone namesake for our Charley; and, straight down, we see the back of a bald eagle in flight. A solitary view of a big, humanless land. Lonesome.

CHARLEY GAVE UP the lonesome life in 1893 and moved to Great Falls, selling an occasional picture and earning enough to live sparely. The landmarks around Great Falls—like the sawed-off bulk of Square Butte and the arabesques of the Missouri River—found their way into Russell pictures. So did the landscape of Cascade, a bit upstream.

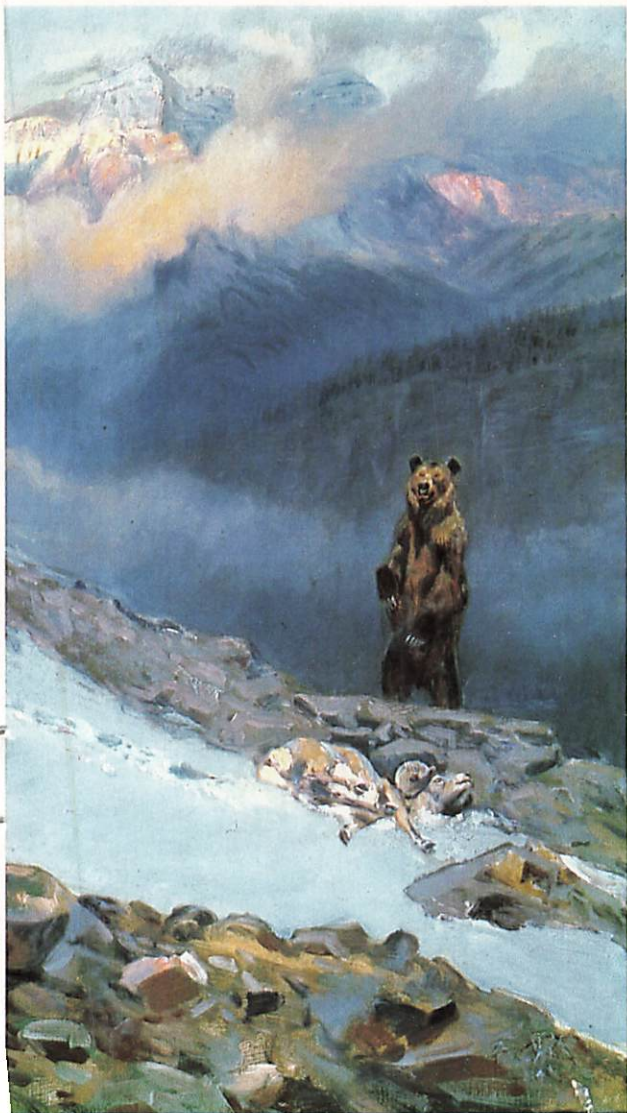
"My father's ranch was seven miles from Cascade," notes Fred Renner. "And I've found the same spots Charley Russell painted there." He was as true to topography as to Indian beadwork.

But Russell found more than scenery in Cascade. "Charley was wintering there when he met Nancy," notes Fred.

Since Cascade had "maybe a hundred people and everyone knew everybody," Fred Renner's family knew them both. Blonde 17-year-old Nancy was living with the Robertses, helping out with household chores. Charley was 14 years her senior and had what he admitted was a fuzzy reputation. He courted her, then proposed marriage, but she said no. It took him almost a year to convince her. As an inducement, he gave her his favorite horse, Monty.

They began married life with \$75, as Nancy later recalled, and a one-room shack in Cascade. (It's still inhabited, enlarged a bit, equipped with a bathroom, but still only large enough for newlyweds.) They stayed

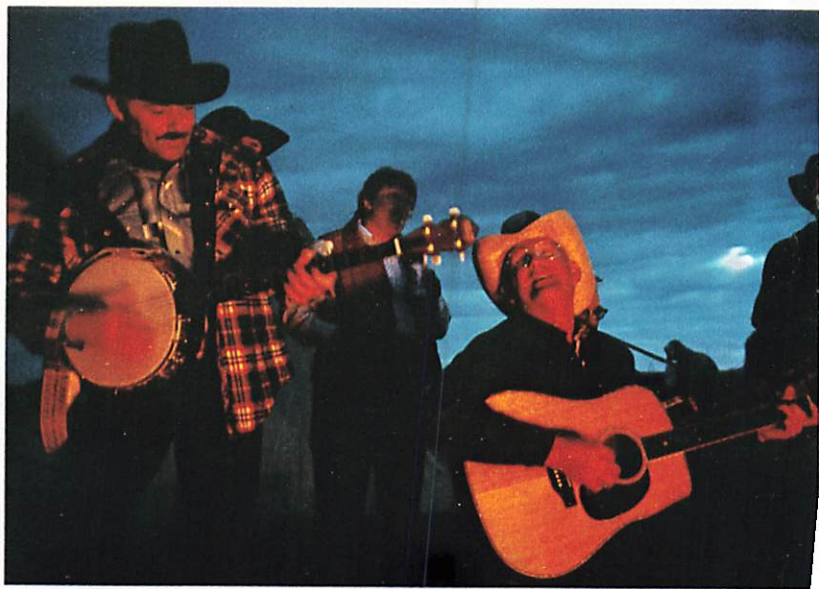
"Whose Meat?", painted in 1914, portrays a confrontation whose outcome is left to the imagination. Not a hunter himself, Russell loved to join hunting expeditions for the vicarious thrill and the chance to observe wildlife. He had a special fascination with bears, seen in many of his paintings and sculptures.

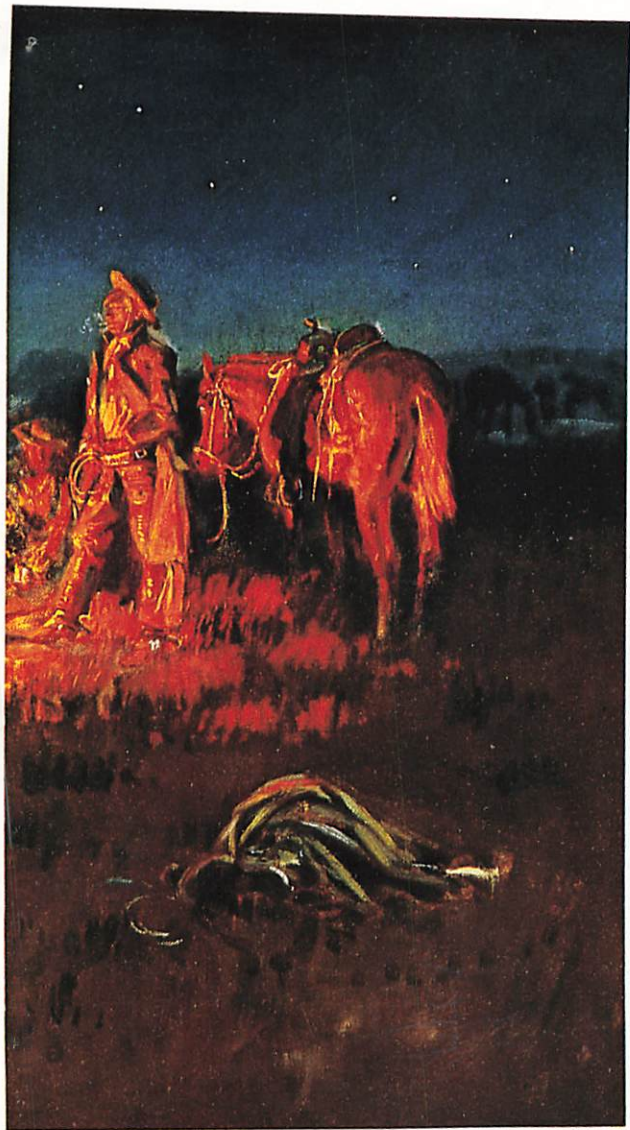


MUSEUM OF WESTERN ART, DENVER



Nostalgic opus from the year before Russell's death, "Laugh Kills Lonesome" (above) exemplifies the wistful quality and bolder color of his later work. Russell painted himself in this picture as a night wrangler in a slicker, at right, stopping by the chuck wagon for a hot cup of coffee. Although such scenes have all but vanished from cowboy life, a group of ranchers (right) travels by wagon train to recapture the times and attend the centennial of the Montana Stockgrowers Association.





MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, MACKAY COLLECTION

a year, then moved to Great Falls, where travelers could see and buy Charley's paintings. Their budget also improved as soon as Nancy became family business manager.

As a boy, Fred Renner got to know the Russells. "Great Falls had about 8,000 people, horse-drawn streetcars, and wooden sidewalks hotter than hell on bare feet. The doctor got the first car about 1905. In winter they'd flood a vacant lot, and when it froze kids could skate. I'd watch men on the Missouri River cut ice—maybe a foot thick."

As American as Currier and Ives. Charley got to know their work—and everyone else's—on trips that he and Nancy took to New York City to sell his pictures and get commissions for illustrating books and magazines. While Charley talked shop with other artists, Nancy cornered collectors

and owners of galleries. Charley himself proved colorful copy for newspapers like the *New York Times*.

Among the growing New York skyscrapers Charley never felt quite at home. "... everybody lives high here," he wrote a friend at home, "but... I'm camped above timber line myself... give me the camp where I savy the people."

BACK IN GREAT FALLS, the Russells were soon able to live with greater style among the solid citizens on Fourth Avenue North. Nancy saw to the completion of a log studio made of telephone poles in the yard, so Charley no longer needed to paint in the dining room. In this log-cabin studio he did the paintings that earned him national fame.

Using a Dutch oven there, he also cooked special meals to serve old cowboy friends—including dried-apple desserts and, at times, venison. It was the place where, as he said, "the bunch can come visit, talk, and smoke while I paint." His paintings seemed to carry on those conversations. They were narratives in oil: adventure yarns, whimsies, poignant tragedies, satires.

"My earliest recollection of Charley Russell?" muses Fred Renner. "I was six or seven, and I was going up First Avenue in Great Falls, and I saw a man wearing a six-shooter. The time had passed when you saw men with guns in Great Falls. I spoke and he spoke and he went down the street."

In summer the Russells usually headed for their camp on the forested bank of Lake McDonald, in what is now Glacier National Park. Friends and neighbors followed them there for visits, and Charley was at his boyish best, building absurd statues out of birchwood with beards of moss, painting while chatting with his guests, getting dressed up as an Indian—convincingly—for snapshots.

Room by room the cabin grew into a rustic lodge. It stands almost unaltered today, its grove of red cedars framing a view of mountains and lake. A fireplace preserves the holiday spirit, for in the wet cement Charley and an artist guest scratched the figures of wild animals, hunters, and, of course, the skull of the bull buffalo. An etched date reads 1907.

Autumn cheer. After 20 childless years, the Russells adopted a son, Jack, here seen with his parents in a 1918 Christmas photo (*below*). "He was a little two months slick ere when we put our iron on him," Russell wrote to a friend. The joys of fatherhood, along with an artistic prowess at its peak, were cut short by Russell's death, his heart weakened by a goiter removed too late. All Montana mourned on October 27, 1926, when pallbearers carried the artist from his Great Falls home (*facing page*) to the horse-drawn hearse he had requested.



CHARLEY WAS APPROACHING the exuberant peak of his powers. Not just in painting, for he also turned to sculptures, many of them cast in bronze.

Prodded by Nancy, critics took note, and the Russells were cultivated by celebrities. Theodore Roosevelt got a handsome bronze called "Smoking Up." The Prince of Wales was presented a Russell painting at the Calgary Stampede of 1916.

The Montana legislature turned down well-known artists to commission Charley to paint a mural in the State Capitol in Helena: a 25-by-12-foot oil showing Lewis and Clark's historic meeting with the Flat-head Indians in what later would become Montana. Charley had to raise the roof of his log studio and stand on movable steps to work on the big canvas. Meticulously he recreated the historic landscape in the Bitter-root Valley, but he carried realism a step further, showing the event mainly from the

Indian point of view: The explorers were small figures in the background; the Flat-head Indians dominated the foreground at almost life-size.

In those days, the historical perspective seemed reversed. But not today. Representative Roland F. Kennerly, himself a Black-foot, sits below the painting when the house is in session.

"People can see that this land was stolen from the people up on the wall," he laughs. His father, Leo Kennerly, knew Charley Russell "and was proud of it."

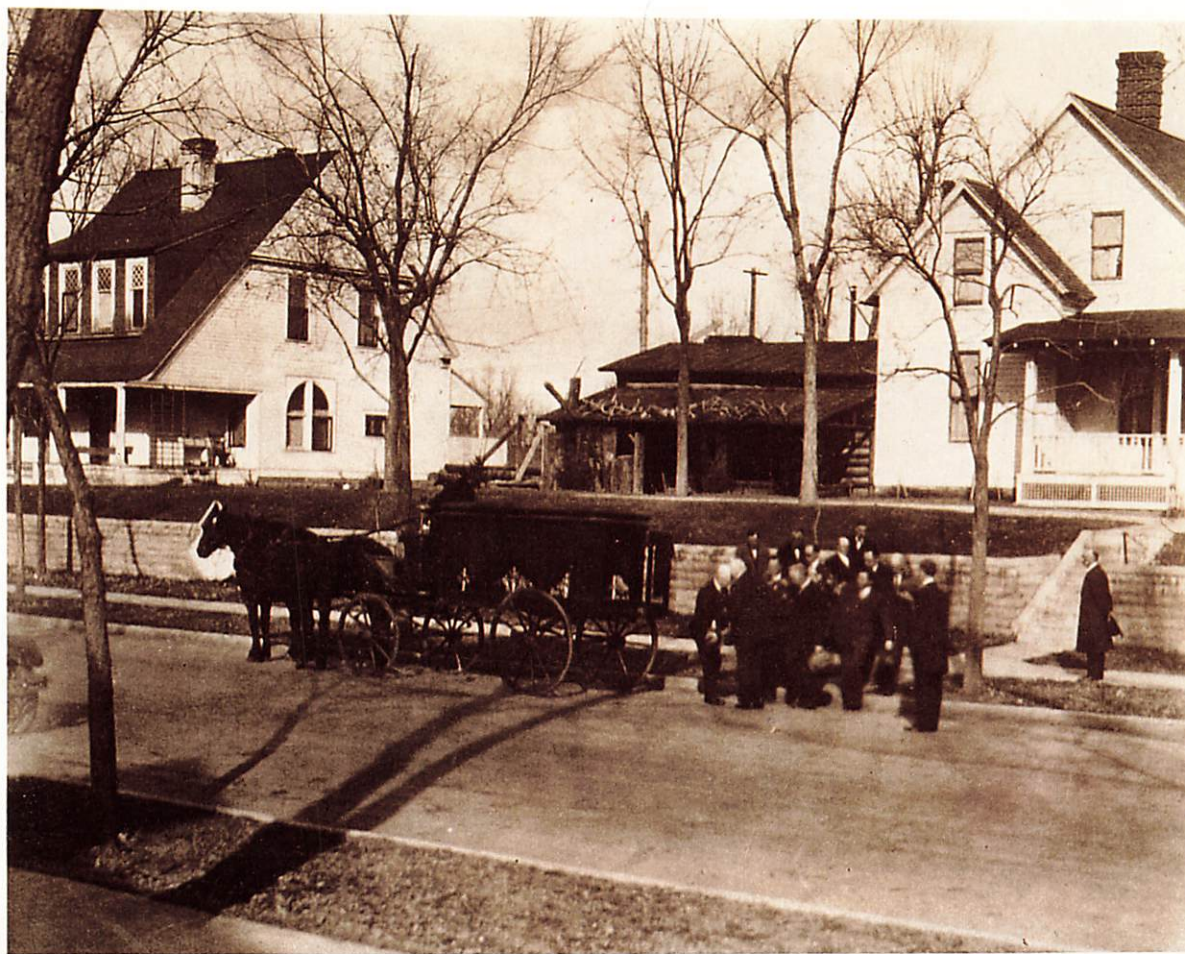
I talked with Representative Ramona Howe, a Crow, during a recent 90-day legislative session. "I'm marking off the days like an old sheep-herder," she admitted. Representative Howe runs both sheep and cattle on her ranch, and "I have a Remington print of Indian hunters hanging in my home. But my friends object because one saddle is a squaw's parade saddle. It would hinder a hunter. I've never caught a mistake like that in a Russell."

Russell partisans criticize Remington's putting cowboys and Indians on cavalry horses and his lack of ranch accuracy, though the Easterner's paintings—especially of non-Western subjects—still fetch a greater price. "But the gap is closing," notes Denver Museum of Western Art director William C. Foxley, who buys the works of both artists—and prefers Russell.

SOME GREAT FALLS CITIZENS still recall Charley Russell's heyday as the town's most famous resident. A 13-year-old boy delivered groceries to the Russell home and remembers Mister Russell as "always courteous and nice to me."

The same lad sold old bottles and mint leaves for juleps to Sid Willis's Mint saloon. Willis was an early collector of Russell art works and displayed them in his saloon.

"It was only as I grew older that I got to appreciate Charley Russell as an artist and a great one," recalls the former delivery boy, a



BOTH FROM C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

man who served as a history-making U. S. senator, and now as ambassador to Japan, Mike Mansfield.

When the Russells traveled, Great Falls neighbors got colorful letters illustrated with sometimes prankish watercolors. Old friends shared Charley's adventures in England, among castles and titled hosts, and in California, where stars of the young motion-picture industry lionized Charley—and bought pictures from Nancy.

"Most of the moovie men I met are good fellers," Charley wrote writer Ted Abbott. But "the beautiful cow boy that makes love . . . aint the same man that spurs his horse of a thirty foot rim rock . . . they usto say that camres wouldnt lye but Holleywood has quired that talk. . . ."

Will Rogers was a close friend; he and Charley looked enough alike to be brothers—and when the two of them were together, Will left the storytelling to Charley. Douglas Fairbanks, Bill Hart, Tom Mix

—they were all active Russell admirers.

But California, Charley noted, "is a good country for lawyers and preachers ones tying the others untying an thair both busy." He preferred closer family life. After long childless years Nancy and Charley had adopted a baby boy, Jack, who sometimes accompanied his folks on trips to avoid Montana's cold weather.

"Little Jack . . . gets lots of out doors . . . the countrys open here and all we do is range heard him. . . ."

The family even started a winter home in Pasadena—a big, multilevel New Mexico-style house with a skylit gallery to show off Charley's paintings. The thousand-square-foot room now boasts Indian handcrafts and one Russell print, "Waiting for a Chinook."

"Ours is the first large family to live here," notes Mrs. Frank Repetti. "We have seven children. No, we don't own any Russell originals. But our obstetrician owns two."



Christmas greeting from beyond the grave (above), Russell's last and most apt benediction was mailed to friends by his widow after his death. On a snowswept buffalo ranch in Alberta (facing page), decomposing skulls of Russell's favorite wild animal symbolize a time long past, but not forgotten, thanks in large part to the artist himself.

While the house was being planned, the Russells named it Trail's End. Prophetic name—Charley never saw it completed.

As his health grew uncertain, Charley mixed brilliant autumnal colors on his palette, the nostalgic hues of sunset and twilight. Sadly he wrote: "The West is dead! You may lose a sweetheart, but you won't forget her." He had few regrets. "I'm glad I lived when I did—not twenty years later. I saw things when they were new."

Doctors gently told him he had only a short time to live. "Don't tell Nancy," he warned the doctors. They did so anyway, and she insisted, "Don't tell Charley." Each had always protected the other.

THOSE LAST DAYS came alive for me when Jack Russell showed me through the family's Great Falls

Here's hoping the worst end of your trail
is behind you
That Dad Time be your friend from
here to the end
and sickness nor sorrow don't
find you

C. M. RUSSELL MUSEUM

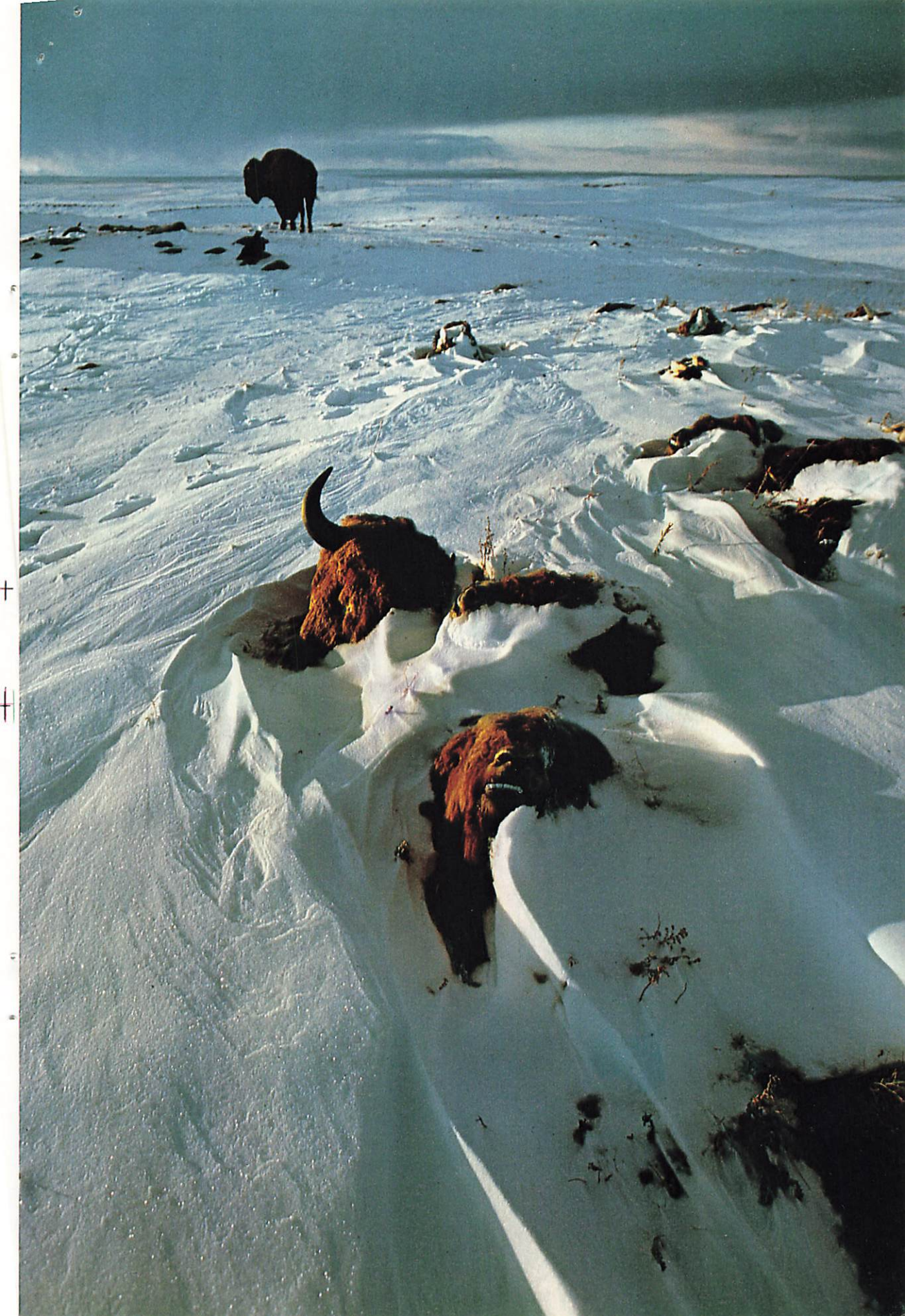
house. "A piano used to sit there," he said, chuckling. "I carved my initials in it once—which didn't endear me to the family."

Jack's laughter stopped as we moved upstairs to a front dormer bedroom. "This was my room, but Dad was sleeping on a bed right there when he took sick." It was the night of Sunday, October 24, 1926. "When the doctor came, they moved me to another room. Dad died right there."

Nancy wanted the bad news kept out of the paper until a neighbor, a close friend of the family, could be told personally. She found a horse-drawn hearse—from Cascade, where her life with Charley had begun. A borrowed horse carried Charley's empty saddle in the procession. The whole mourning town closed down.

Charley lies buried now on a hilltop with a vast, last landscape of Montana. His headstone is a boulder, as durable as art.

In his book *Trails Plowed Under*, Charley wrote about the death of an old cowboy buried on the prairie "with the end-gate of the bed-wagon for a headstone, which the cattle have long since rubbed down. . . . It sounds lonesome, but he ain't alone, 'cause these old prairies has cradled many of his kind in their long sleep." □



SWITZERLAND

